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ABSTRACT

In the attempt to improve achievement test scores, schools may overlook affective activities and events as well as processes and procedures that influence students in positive ways. The self-fulfilling prophecies held by teachers, administrators, and others for their students and the self-concepts the students hold for themselves are two major psychological notions that serve as a base for educational concerns. Using the mass of recent national reports on school improvement as its point of reference, this paper offers the following 10 strategies for improving the school climate: (1) make students feel important, (2) make students feel invited, (3) deal with needed changes in others from a positive point of view, (4) learn to make appropriate nonverbal cues, (5) get to know each student personally, (6) learn to empathize, (7) establish parameters, (8) use student-centered instruction, (9) learn to know and understand the difference between discipline and punishment, and (10) be enthusiastic about teaching. The references list eight citations. (MLF)

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BUILDING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

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I. Introduction

With the tremendous attention that has been given to the cognitive outcomes of schools, it would appear to be important for schools to pay attention to the affective nature of the enterprise. In the attempt to improve achievement test scores, schools may overlook those activities and events as well as processes and procedures that may influence students in very positive ways that are not measured by standardized tests.

This workshop will use as its point of reference, the mass of recent national reports. All that was presented for education to consider was not necessarily negative. In fact, many positive suggestions have been offered for the improvement of schools that relate closely to environmental issues. By focusing on research from education, psychology, and business for a broader perspective, it is possible to view school improvement to include the entire learning spectrum.

II. Educational Importance

Most states throughout America have responded to the report offered by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (A Nation at Risk). It would appear that this reaction may be typical of education in that many responses are likely to damage the original intent of the effort. For example, many states have increased academic requirements by requiring more math, science, english, foreign language, etc. (the basics). This movement which has been widely heralded tends to ignore very important issues related to student self-image, self-fulfilling prophecies and other environmental concerns. When schools become more concerned with the subject matter than the students, it is likely that student achievement scores will rise as student dropout rates also increase. It would appear that both academic performance and climate factors are important if schools are to maximize the potential of their primary mission.

III. Basic Premise

When viewing education from a broader perspective, it would appear that concerns such as student achievement, discipline, equity, and teaching effectiveness are all interrelated concepts. As schools deal with one of these concepts to the exclusion of the others, the opportunity for success is limited. The self-fulfilling prophecies held by teachers, administrators and others for the students with whom they are associated and the self concepts the students hold for themselves are two major psychological notions that appear to serve as a base from which to view educational concerns.

IV. Strategies for Building a Positive School Climate

When reviewing research related to student achievement, school discipline, teaching effectiveness and business productivity, one is struck with a sense of consistency about the strategies that appear to offer the most hope for improvement of schools. Those strategies stem back to the two notions already identified. Following are ten points which seem to rise out of the broad research base considered when dealing with the concept of school climate.

Make students feel important. This is probably a human right. In the research reported in the book "In Search of Excellence," it was noted that one of the things the very successful corporations did was to consider their clientele as important. They made them feel this way by the way they treated them, how they listened to them, and reacted to their suggestions. Schools have often taken on a very impersonal stance toward their clientele, the students. By giving appropriate responsibility, listening to, and valuing the students, students will be made to feel important.

Make students feel invited. In research conducted by Purkey in North Carolina, students were identified as invited or disinvited by the way they were treated by the teacher as they entered the classroom. If teachers greeted them pleasantly, the students were identified as invited. If, however, the teacher greeted the student with a frown, or other negative behavior they were identified as disinvited. Test scores and other variables indicated that the two groups, while different in the eyes of the teacher, were really not different in their academic ability. When asked a question they could not answer, the invited students were given an average of 3 seconds to respond before the teacher gave clues, restated the question, redirected the question, or answered the question themselves. On the other hand, the disinvited students who were just as capable, were given an average of .9 second to respond to questions they could not answer before the teacher reentered the picture. Teachers who want to make students feel invited might be well advised to visit some lower elementary classes (K-3) to get some good ideas on how to make classrooms inviting places to be. One should note the personal way teachers deal with students, the warmth, the colors used, how students are evaluated, and the voice tones.

Deal with needed changes in others from a positive point of view. Research done by Rosenshine and Furst found that positive reinforcement and appropriate praise were positively correlated to learning. They also found that criticism was negatively correlated to learning. These findings suggest that if teachers are really interested in learning, they should be looking for what is right, not what is wrong. When grading papers, for example, teachers may want to consider checking the correct responses and adding points as opposed to checking what is wrong and taking away points. the point is that teachers must overtly work at being positive because the general way of doing business in schools tends to be negative.

Learn to make appropriate nonverbal cues. Research indicates that we tend to learn more through our eyes than we do through our ears. A smile, a nod, a wink and/or a pat on the back have tremendous power related to the climate of schools. How teachers and students use space, the physical arrangements of the classroom, the tone of the voice, gestures, and even dress are clues which send powerful messages about how teachers feel about the students, the school, their work and themselves.

Get to know each student personally. As teachers pursue activities that make it possible for them to get to know students personally, it is clear that several important things occur. For the teacher, this kind of knowledge is extremely valuable when it comes to such concerns as student behavior and other related concerns. For the student, the personal interest expressed by the teacher is a strong signal as the value the teacher places upon them as an individual. The obvious implication for teachers is that they will have to exert extra effort if they are to attain a personal knowledge of each student.

Learn to empathize. It appears that one of the traps that has been laid for students and teachers is an over generalization of the concept of consistency. For example, when students are tardy or misbehave, consistent codes are followed in determining actions on the part of the school. Little or no consideration is given to the circumstances that caused the problem. Therefore, schools generally treat symptoms not causes and the results speak for themselves. If education truly wants more productive behavior on the part of the students, it must be interested in causes. In other words, schools must be fair and the only way to achieve fairness is to learn to empathize.

Establish parameters. Research on student achievement indicates that clarity, task orientation, time on task, letting students learn the criterion material, and structuring are all positively correlated to learning. Note how each of these variables is related somehow to the boundaries that exist in a school, classroom or on a lesson. It appears that students behave better and learn more in an environment that provides these types of boundaries clearly. This is not a plea for more rules but rather a statement about where one begins and ends and the boundaries which will determine success in a given situation.

Use student centered instruction. Students learn more when they inquire into as opposed to being instructed in. Variability is positively correlated to learning. The kinds of methods and materials which are student centered tend also to provide variability. Critical thinking and problem solving are much more student centered than are the more traditional teaching methods. Herein lies one of the major traps of the current push to add rigor to the curriculum in schools. As schools move toward being very subject matter centered, the failure rate of students is likely to increase because of the disregard for the value of the individual person. Educators do not intend for such to happen but it almost certainly will.

Learn to know and understand the difference between discipline and punishment. According to the Gallup poll, the most serious concern the public has for education continues to be discipline. It is important to note that discipline is really the "ounce of prevention." However, most discipline codes in schools deal with symptoms not causes and focus heavily upon punishment. Certainly

basic rules need to be established and enforced but an overemphasis on punishment appears to be counterproductive. Research indicates that students who are discipline problems are often above average in intelligence and are starved for attention. In addition, most serious discipline problems do not just happen. They are often mountains made out of molehills. Finally, teachers who have fewer discipline problems appear to solve many problems before they actually occur. When trouble does occur, there are at least four simple points worth noting when dealing with discipline problems.

a. Isolate the situation
b. Deescalate or defuse the situation.
c. Know when not to hear.
d. Know when a situation is over and then forgive and forget.

Be enthusiastic about teaching. Teacher enthusiasm has been identified as one of the most highly correlated variables to student achievement. In addition, people tend to be most enthusiastic about that which they know best. Therefore, the day a person decides to enter education is the day that person forever commits to be a student. When teachers tend to ask lots of questions, are committed to the tasks, and demonstrate by some behavior that they really believe that what they are doing is important, students tend to rate them as more enthusiastic. Since many reports suggest that teaching in American schools can be described as "blah," it would appear that classrooms could use a good healthy dose of enthusiasm. People excited about what they are doing will be absolutely critical to the success of educational programs in the future.

V. Conclusion

As one reviews the 10 strategies discussed, the interrelatedness of the notions of student achievement, student discipline, school ethos and ambiance, school culture and climate should be noted. In the effort to improve schools by providing more "stuff," the very goals which are being sought may literally be undermined. Now, the substance of what goes on in schools is important but to consider that in isolation from all of the other things which go to make up a successful student, a successful teacher, and/or a successful school would be a great mistake. By working to build a positive school climate where academic achievement takes place along with the other types of learning, it should be possible to build the kind of schools that are really desired by all.

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